Beyond the school, beyond North America: New maps for the critical geographies of education

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ABSTRACT

This review outlines two directions for the critical geographies of education (CGE), an emergent subfield of critical human geography. Firstly, it rehearses Marxist critiques of schooling and suggests that CGE should not treat existent mass, compulsory schooling (or perhaps even the concept of mass, compulsory schooling) as an automatic social good. Secondly, it encourages CGE to move beyond the current research epicenter of urban North America. CGE should also theorize global schooling policy and practice as a key component of development geopolitics and soft power. If CGE expands outward in these directions—and sharpens its critiques from Afrocentric, feminist, autonomist and other critical traditions—it has the potential to greatly influence cultural, political, and development geographies as well as more generalized critical social/spatial theory on institutions, youth, and labor.

1. Welcome, critical geographies of education

The critical geographies of education (CGE) is one of the latest subfields of human geography to be officially recognized by the AAG (AAG CGE-SG, n.d.). CGE is not—as some misperceive—primarily concerned with the teaching of geography or university pedagogies. Rather, CGE research examines the social and spatial politics of schooling institutions. It theorizes from the schoolyard and identifies mass education as a key site of both progressive and regressive politics (Nguyen et al., 2017). The subfield promises—and, in fact, already has begun—to open interdisciplinary dialogue about schools: a nearly ubiquitous social institution in the contemporary world (e.g. Collins and Coleman, 2008; Thiem, 2009; McCreary et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2018). This sustained (and now legibly conceptualized) geographical attention to schools, schooling, state-based education policy, and the socialization of youth will undoubtedly encourage critical spatial theorizing and praxis long called for by our colleagues in sociology, anthropology, and comparative education (e.g. Robertson, 2010; Vavrus, 2016).

Here, I revisit and reconsider one of the original directives for CGE—Claudia Hanson Thiem’s call for more “outward-looking geographies of education.” Thiem (2009) hoped that CGE would foreground, “various political, cultural, and economic projects pursued through [education’s] content, governing structures, or modes of distribution” (2009, 168). While great progress has been made in this vein, this critical review presents two additional directions for CGE to continue pushing “outward.” First, I suggest that CGE has (thus far) not been critical enough of compulsory, mass schooling. CGE, while critical of some particularly egregious policies, has not generally engaged historical geographies to openly problematize its subject: the whole notion of compulsory, mass institutionalized schooling (Basu, 2013; Collins and Coleman, 2008 are perhaps exceptions). Secondly, CGE has (thus far) been spatially parochial, focusing mainly on North America (and almost exclusively urban areas within North America). Perhaps the most obvious way for CGE to continue “looking outward” is to examine why compulsory schooling institutions proliferated around the globe. Such an investigation will allow CGE to contribute to questions typically asked by development and political geographers and help us to better understand the role of curriculum in development geopolitics. Both of these interventions stay true to CGE’s commitment to “center schooling in theory generation” (Nguyen et al., 2017, 2). They reaffirm the “criticality” of CGE’s analyses and will expand CGE’s currency in more established critical human geography circles.

2. To move through and beyond the schooling institution

CGE has produced important work documenting the structural violence of weaponized neoliberal education policy like school closure, privatization, and contemporary pedagogies of nationalism (McCreary et al., 2013; Holloway and Jöns, 2012; Nguyen, 2014). CGE has also been eager to document and analyze “education-based social movements”, which challenge the generally bleak situation of public
schooling in North America (Nguyen et al., 2017). These are important projects which help geographers to better understand the contemporary social world. However, now that CGE is an established subfield, it might begin to move through and look beyond formal schooling.

School is all-too-often promoted as a universal social good. CGE scholars (and many others) certainly take issue with neoliberal schooling reforms. However, one gets a sense that the subfield generally believes schooling is salvageable with the right anti-neoliberal and community-based activism. However, this may be too generous an assessment of schooling institutions as they are currently and have historically been conceived. I argue that we should openly question schools’ status as a social good. Historically, the hegemonic model of compulsory, mass schooling familiar to us today emerged out of very specific geographic contexts and was/is tooled to aid capitalist expansion and exploitation, and later nationalist fervor. We would do well to treat this social technology with much skepticism.

While all societies had institutions and customs which socialized young people, Western-style mass, compulsory schooling had very particular origins in capitalist industrialization-transitions. E.P. Thompson relays that early British capitalists (c.1770s), “saw education as a training in the ‘habit of industry’…the schools had effected an extraordinary change: ‘[students]… become more tractable and obedient, and less quarrelsome and revengeful’” (Powell in Thompson, 1967, 84). In a classic intervention in critical education theory, Bowles and Gintis identify Massachusetts as the birthplace of the common school. They write that the legislature there, “invoked the power of schooling to reinforce the moral training of the family” (Bowles and Gintis, [1976] 2011, 37). In their telling, the industry town of Lowell, Massachusetts played a particularly prominent role in the invention of compulsory school as a provincialized technology designed to form worker-ontologies. Rural farmers and recent immigrants who were rightfully skeptical about the benefits of becoming industrial workers were engulfed by a compulsory schooling institution. In the early United States, schools sought to “produce people who would have the traditional values of community life (a life that may never really have existed in this ideal form) and… the norms and dispositions required of industrious, thrifty, and efficient workers” (Apple, 2004, 64). Today, compulsory schooling continues to prepare youth, “for adult work roles, by socializing people to function well (and without complaint) in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation or public office” (Bowles and Gintis, [1976] 2011, xi; see also Anyon, 2011).

Once the fanciful promises so embedded cultural consciousnesses are critically examined, we might reasonably question the commonsense social good of mass schooling. Education theorist Michael Apple even asserts:

the common school and the ideological underpinnings that support it have never served to adequately educate…schools have served basically to apportion and distribute opportunities that are consistently unequal in terms of economic class (Apple, 2004, 108).

Autonomist philosopher Ivan Illich adds that: “instead of equalizing chances, the school system has monopolized their distribution” ([1970] 2000). While some might try to link these critiques to bad policy, it seems just as likely that the “essence” of formal schooling might be rotten to its capitalist core. Intractable features of schooling like time-tables, rules, teacher-experts, testing and scripted-curriculum, grading, the social construction of educated persons, state-recognized knowledge, a physical schooling space, age-specific segregation, and a barrage of alienation to prepare and guide future-workers have all been linked to the political economic role of schooling (e.g. Mitchell, 2018; Illich, [1970] 2000; Means, 2018; Katz, 2004; Bowles and Gintis, [1976] 2011; Willis, 1981; Weis, 1990).

While this critique against schools is rooted primarily in Marxist theory and the legitimation and perpetuation of capitalism, a dip into other scholarly perspectives continues to reveal questionable historical and present goings-on in schools. For example, postcolonial scholars explain how residential schools were deployed in the genocide against Native people in the US and Canada. These institutions, in the horrifying words of the notorious Colonel Richard Pratt, “killed the Indian to save the Man” (Adams, 1995). Critical race scholars have also suggested that “the official school curriculum [is] a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 18). Political geographers can elucidate how compulsory school systems are used to promote the idea of a homogenous and bounded nation-state (Mitchell, 2018, 45; Cheney, 2007). And development geographers (see below) can examine how multilateral education policy may carry Western geopolitical interests (Odora Hoppers, 2014).

CGE scholars have not been eager to take up the existential question of their subject. However, a critical geographies of education should draw from the already vast social foundations of education literature. Drawing from Marxist, postcolonial and decolonial, anarchist, and other standpoints, this literature presents serious theoretical and practical challenges to institutionalized schools and the precarious histories upon which the whole project of mass schooling rests. A broader examination of “education” from socialist, Afrocentric, and other critical perspectives would undoubtedly yield productive challenges to the hegemony of mass, compulsory schooling (see Suissa, 2011; Nyere, 1968). CGE has an important opportunity to help social theorists move through (in wrecking-ball fashion) schooling institutions in order to look toward outward more humane and anti-capitalist forms of learning in and of the world.

3. To dislodge the darling of ‘development’

Critical education scholar Michael Apple writes that Western-style compulsory mass schooling “help[s] create people (with the appropriate meanings and values), who see no other serious possibility to the economic and cultural assemblage now extant” (Apple, 2004, 6). This program is disastrous enough in the spatial heart of capitalism. However, the rampant export of schooling institutions has also contributed to similar valorization of capitalist approaches and desires in places less folded into capitalist hegemony. For decades, modernization theorists and international development experts peddled the intuitive theory that more schooling for more people would lead to more development (Inkeles, 1998; Mundy, 1999). However, scholars are beginning to question this supposed causal linkage. James Ferguson (2015), for instance, points out that school-expansion for development reinforces a narrative of skills-shortage and the need to “teach a man to fish”. However, teaching more people to be productive capitalists neglects the structural geographic problem of surplus populations and increasingly wageless spaces (e.g. Li, 2013; Denning, 2010). Julius Nyere (1968) foresaw this problem 50 years ago, writing: “the type of education [Tanzanians] have received…led them to expect wage employment—probably in an office…their education was not sufficiently related to the tasks which have to be done in our society” (1968, 425).

The expansion of formal, Western-style compulsory mass schooling is an incredible success for the development industry. Schools get built, students attend, and adults begin to accept schooling as a new and improved normal. However, as Cindi Katz (2004) notes, this acceptance of schooling only occurs once “the viability of other forms of learning began to erode” (2004, 144). In other words, spaces with alternative means of making a living are chased out by capitalist interests, aided by the lessons of schooling. This happens both in the Global South and Global North (e.g. Cheney, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010; Weis, 1990). All too often, “education ha[s] proven no guarantee of anything; the most educated were the most dejected, [and] those with little or no formal education and no family assets were pushed to the limits of their resourcefulness” (Katz, 2004, 195; see also Cheney, 2007; Kendall, 2007). Mass schooling limits political economic imaginations and limits participation in quasi-capitalist economies.

At the macro geopolitical level, schooling expansion has been used
for dispossession. Schools have a soft power territorializing function—not in service of any particular state, but in service of Western-capitalist ontologies. Hoppers (2014) argues that a geopolitics of sameness reveals the uniformity and commonality of various donors when it comes to education practice (2014, 107). Schooling is a salient part of the promissory narrative of development—it is positioned as a tangible step an individual, family, or state can take to “catch up” to the West. But, of course, as development geographers have long known, the discourse of “catching up” only legitimates unequal relations (Ferguson, 2015). Certainly, this genre of critique remains unpopular, not least among our informants who were historically excluded from schooling (e.g. Haugh, 2013). Tania Li considers this conundrum:

To argue that farmers should not aspire to be modern, or send their children to school, or that educated young people shouldn’t seek well-paying jobs appropriate to their qualifications seems out of step… But as critical scholars we need to be alert to the effects of promissory narratives, and the destruction carried out in their name. (Li, 2013, 2)

CGE should build on the important work of geographers like Craig Jeffrey and Cindi Katz to “alert” the rest of us to the destruction carried out by schooling. This work might take the form of geopolitical analysis—there’s plenty of multilateral agreements for education-inclined political geographers to comb through. It might also take the form of ethnographic cultural or development geography: how are the meanings and effects of schooling variable over space? How do the geographies of wagelessness impact schooling? How do schools impact the geographies of rurality (both in Southern and Northern ‘spaces of development’)?

4. Lessons to be learned

School is a central part of our global social world. Modern schooling directly intersects other major social institutions like family and the capitalist labor market. CGE is new, exciting, and full of promise—it will give critical geographers of all inclinations tools to think about school as more than a case study site. This note has mapped two “outward-looking” avenues that would reinforce CGE’s critical credentials and geographical roots. Clearly, sustained attention to North American urban schooling politics should always have a place in CGE. However, CGE should also take the opportunity to think through the rapid geographic spread of a western social, political, and economic institution designed to create a “geopolitics of sameness.” It should also seriously interrogate the provincialized geographical origins of schooling, asking how such a local institution has become a universalized experience of global youth. Some might suggest that school has taken too much of a beating in this note, that its historical legacy and problematic geopolitics can be countered. While conceding that I present an unsympathetic view of schooling, I submit that such critique is needed to counterbalance the often unquestioned social good of (the idea of) school. What theoretical interventions could arise if we started from a different premise: that schools have never contributed to the personal growth or even material advancement of the majority of students (think poor students, students of color, students in colonies… the list could go on)? If we take seriously that mass schooling (at least often) works in the service of racialized capitalist imperialism, CGE is already well-equipped to understand the widespread alternatives and resistance to schooling which deserve more attention in the contemporary moment.

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References


